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ABSTRACT

The population of the United States is growing more culturally diverse each year, and this diversity is clearly evident among families with young children; however, individuals who work in early childhood programs are not as diverse as those they serve. Moreover, many early childhood professionals have little preparation for working with families from a wide range of cultures and linguistic backgrounds. Even among interculturally competent service providers and teachers, choosing materials to distribute to families is sometimes difficult. This Digest focuses on how to identify and select culturally and linguistically appropriate materials for parents and family members. The Digest suggests that service providers get to know their own culture and the culture and people they serve. The Digest also discusses ways to determine the strengths and limitations of specific materials, assess translated materials, and adapt materials. (LPP)

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Selecting Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Materials: Suggestions for Service Providers

Rosa Milagros Santos and Debbie Reese

The population of the United States is growing more culturally diverse each year, and this diversity is clearly evident among families with young children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996; Children's Defense Fund, 1998). Lynch and Hanson (1998) note that the individuals who work in early childhood programs are not as diverse as those they serve. In California, for example, there is little diversity among students preparing to be teachers (Hanson, 1990). Moreover, many early childhood professionals have little preparation for working with families from a wide range of cultures and linguistic backgrounds (Garcia, McLaughlin, Spodek, & Saracho, 1995).

In many cases, educators' and other service providers' lack of experience with and knowledge of diverse families makes the development of relationships with them difficult and may contribute to families' underutilization of services (McLean, 1997). Fortunately, materials designed to help service providers become more interculturally competent are available from a variety of sources, including public libraries.

Based on Hains, Lynch, and Winton's (1997) definition of cultural competence, "intercultural" competence is defined as "the ability to relate and communicate effectively when individuals involved in the interaction do not share the same culture, ethnicity, language, or other salient variables" (p. 2). Service providers who are learning to become more interculturally competent begin to appreciate the differences that exist between and among the diverse populations they work with, thus serving diverse families more effectively (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Part of intercultural competence is being able to identify culturally and linguistically appropriate materials that parents and family members will find useful.

Even among interculturally competent service providers and teachers, however, choosing materials to distribute to families is sometimes difficult. This Digest focuses on how to identify and select culturally and linguistically appropriate materials (e.g., books, brochures, pamphlets, fact sheets, and multimedia) for parents and family members.

Where Should I Start?

Some parenting and education-related materials developed for families with young children provide information that is culturally and linguistically appropriate. However, other materials may appear to be appropriate but contain information that families may find offensive. How can service providers identify and select appropriate materials? Ways to begin this process include the following:

- *Get to know yourself.* Spend time learning about your own heritage and culture. At first glance, your family activities may look like everyone else's in your neighborhood. However, there are differences across families that may not appear to be overtly "cultural." For example, in many families, a strong work ethic is present that has its roots in specific cultural traditions. Try to learn more about the stories of your own ancestors. Where have they lived? If they are immigrants to this country, what brought them here? When you recognize yourself as "one of the many," you are likely to be more accepting of others' cultural values and practices and to accept them as having validity equal to your own.
- *Get to know as much as you can about the culture of the people you work with.* Learn about their beliefs, values, and traditions. Are there specific accomplishments the family or community is proud of? What do they believe are the most important things their children should learn? Who are the members of their family and what are their roles? How do they see their role as parents? Find out if there are elements of their culture they guard from outside eyes, discover why they are protective of them, and consider how this protection may affect intervention. Become familiar with their concerns about stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. What is their history with educational, health, and welfare institutions? How do their experiences with these services affect their willingness to access services? Remember that answers to these questions may vary from one family to the next, depending on factors such as setting or income.

How Much Do Families within the Same Culture Differ?

Families follow traditional cultural or parenting patterns to differing degrees, depending on a wide range of factors, including (1) the primary language the family speaks at home and in the community, (2) the family's level of education, (3) the family's religious affiliation, (4) the family's country of origin, (5) the length of time the family has lived in the United States, (6) the family's degree of acculturation, and (7) where the family currently lives. Keep in mind that looking at specific factors in isolation may be misleading—many factors work individually and together to influence parenting patterns.

There are big within-culture differences in all these matters, and income may be a stronger predictor of family preferences and goals than some aspects of culture. It is important to note as well that not all families are comfortable with providing specific information about themselves. It can be helpful to find someone in the area from within the culture, or perhaps someone the family knows well, who can introduce you to the family and get the relationship started on a positive note. Those who work with families are likely to be

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more effective when they know and determine the comfort level within which families are willing to share their stories.

What Should I Look for?

Beyond these general considerations are the specific strengths and limitations of the materials you want to distribute. You can assess the appropriateness of particular materials by asking yourself the following questions:

- *Does the publication, video, or audiocassette take into account implicit and explicit assumptions, beliefs, or values that are appropriate or potentially problematic for the receiving family?* For example, does the material assume that the mother is the decision maker in the family? Does it promote or assume the idea that, across cultures, family members take an active role in their children's education and school activities and that this "active role" takes the same form across cultures? Such assumptions can lead service providers to believe that parents who do not come to PTA meetings and similar functions do not care, when in fact they may care but they show their concern in different ways. One group may think "active role" means joining the PTA, while another group may think it means making sure homework is done. Still another may think it means instilling values that demonstrate respect for authority.
- *Is the information presented in a format preferred by the receiving family?* For example, if a family's preferred mode of accessing information is through oral or visual means, is the information you are providing available in audio or video versions?
- *Is the literacy level appropriate for the receiving family?* For example, is the information organized and presented in a way that a family member with fewer than 6 years of schooling can benefit? Or is the information presented in such a way that the family will find the material patronizing and insulting?
- *Are technical terms and jargon explained effectively?* For example, does the publication include a glossary of frequently used terms?
- *Are the case studies, pictures, and graphics welcoming to the receiving family?* For example, are diverse groups of people represented in the images? Do the images suggest a contemporary or nonstereotypical view of various families?

What about Translated Materials?

Often, materials developed for English-speaking populations are translated into a second language for use with a different population (e.g., English to Spanish). There is an implicit but mistaken assumption that the translated material will be appropriate for the second population, simply by merit of translation. However, just as with materials in English, translated materials must be carefully reviewed for cultural and linguistic appropriateness. Sometimes, the individual who transcribed the material from English may not be familiar with educational ideas and their application to intervention, which may result in the material being inappropriate in that domain as well. Finally, service providers must become familiar with the dialect in use within any given community. Spanish-translated materials for a Mexican American community may not be appropriate for a Puerto Rican community. Finding someone to help you review the translated material may prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding between you and the families with whom you work.

What about Adapting Materials?

Service providers may find that a publication has strong points but that it needs to be adapted in some ways to make it more useful. For example, lengthy books or manuals can be excerpted, revised, or presented one chapter at a time (but be mindful of copyright issues). You can also develop companion brochures or guides to help parents apply concepts presented in a publication to their own situation. Flyers listing related local resources or explaining terms or jargon are also useful.

Conclusion

Becoming aware of resources that are culturally and linguistically appropriate is not a simple process. Banks (1998) points out that, historically, values and knowledge systems of mainstream researchers have been regarded as culturally neutral, objective, and universal. Culturally inappropriate mainstream ideas that have become institutionalized in well-meaning programs may harm and disempower groups (e.g., families with low income and people of color).

Service providers who develop intercultural competence and collect information on available culturally and linguistically appropriate materials that can be used with families in their community are more likely to be successful in their work with families than service providers or teachers who do not do so. Careful review of materials before using them with a family is essential. No single resource can address all of a family's needs, but, in many cases, materials can be adapted to make them more useful.

For More Information

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